

LaFollette vs. the Farmer-Labor Party

By WM. Z. FOSTER.

THE June 17th Convention in St. Paul, which founded the new National Farmer-Labor Party, suffered attacks from many directions. The capitalist press assailed it as no other gathering has been assailed for many years. The labor reactionaries of the Conference for Progressive Political Action also took a crack at it thru their official journal, Labor. Then old Gompers, following his usual method of trying to destroy everything progressive, poured out a torrent of slander against it. But the worst attack of all came from LaFollette, the pseudo-progressive. His attack was most unscrupulous and had more of a detrimental effect upon the convention than any other.

The world has been told that the reason for LaFollette's attack was his determination not to be linked up with the Communists. But this is merely a surface excuse. The real explanation lies deeper. It is true that LaFollette wants nothing to do with the Communists. He is not a revolutionist, but a staunch sustainer of capitalism. He does not want to abolish private ownership of the basic industries, but to perpetuate it. He merely wants to reform capitalism by removing a few of what he calls abuses by the privileged class. Thus he naturally comes into head-on collision with the Communist program, which demands the abolition of capitalism root and branch, and inevitably he finds himself constantly in open conflict with the Communists. But in order to fight the Communists in St. Paul, he had no need to attempt to destroy the convention itself. All he had to do was to flood the convention with delegates. He could have poured hundreds if not thousands of them into the convention and made his group master of the situation. Then he could have either refused seats to the Workers Party delegates or, if the Communists had been admitted, made it impossible for them to accomplish anything. But he did not adopt this obviously logical course. He tried to blow up the convention altogether.

LaFollette's assault upon the convention was made not primarily to detach himself from the Communists, but to destroy the movement centering in the St. Paul gathering. He did not dare to flood the convention with delegates, for this could not have accomplished his full purpose. It is

quite probable that by such a course he could have cleared the convention organization while the LaFollette movement of the Workers Party official delegation. In all likelihood he could also have secured the adoption of a milk-and-water program to his own liking. But there was something else at the convention that he could not possibly have got rid of, and to which he is violently opposed. This was the idea of forming a national party of industrial workers and exploited farmers. During the past few years this idea has made tremendous headway among the poor farmers and the workers in the industries. But it is a project anathema to LaFollette, with his timid policy of middle class reform. No matter how heavily he had watered the St. Paul convention with delegates, he could not have drowned out this idea, which runs so counter to his plans. The St. Paul convention, in any event, was bound to give expression to the Farmer-Labor party movement upon a national scale and to lay the basis for an organization. Hence, for LaFollette, there was nothing else to do but to destroy it and to steer as much of the movement as possible to the Cleveland conference on July 4th, where the sentiment for a Farmer-Labor Party will be quietly and expeditiously assassinated by LaFollette and his bureaucratic trade union aids. LaFollette's big blow against the St. Paul convention was really directed against the Farmer-Labor Party movement as such, and he carried it out with as little scruple as was shown by any of the big capitalistic interests which turned their guns upon the convention.

The LaFollette and Farmer-Labor Party movements are rival movements, even where the latter takes on the most conservative forms. This is because they have different objectives. The Farmer-Labor Party movement, however, weakly and timidly it may manifest itself, and even tho it may include considerable sections of the petty bourgeoisie, is nevertheless essentially a break with the old capitalist parties and an effort to set up a new political organization. The LaFollette movement, on the other hand, is not such a break. It still clings to the old parties, maintaining a thousand connections with them. It lacks the courage and initiative to make a real break and to start a battle for a separate organization of its own. Leaving aside the matter of the naturally greater radicalism and keener class consciousness of the Farmer-Labor party movement, the fact that the

latter is consciously striving for an organization is not, is sufficient to throw the two movements into opposition all along the line. LaFollette's attempted destruction of the St. Paul convention was only one skirmish in the war that is developing everywhere.

The LaFollette movement envisages more than merely the nomination of the Wisconsin Messiah and an ardent Disciple for President and Vice President of the United States. It also contemplates the placing of state tickets in all the states where the movement is able to muster sufficient strength. It is over these state tickets that the greatest clash on the organization question will occur between the LaFollette movement and the Farmer-Labor Party movement, entirely aside from the question of program, etc. LaFollette and his lieutenants have as their objective the scaring up of the greatest possible number of votes for their program of petty bourgeois reform. They want quick results. They calculate that the best way to accomplish them in the several states is by endorsing candidates on the old party tickets or by setting up independents, as their opportunistic policy may dictate. On the other hand, the Farmer-Labor parties in the various states are bound to set up tickets of their own. This is true whether they are radical or conservative in their makeup. Thus, even in states where the conservative farmer-labor parties may endorse LaFollette, they will find themselves in open rivalry with his state movements. The only places where such rivalry will not develop in an organizational sense is where the Farmer-Labor party is strong enough to deliver more votes to LaFollette and his state ticket than he could possibly get thru an independent movement. In such few cases, as for example in Minnesota, he will probably accept and support the whole Farmer-Labor Party ticket. But elsewhere his movement will enter into open competition with the Farmer-Labor Party movement and knife its candidates on behalf of his own nondescript independents and old party progressives. The fact that weak Farmer-Labor parties, which thus find themselves attacked by LaFollette, may be conservative in character and endorse LaFollette nationally will not save them. The shapeless LaFollette movement tends distinctly to liquidate the budding Farmer-Labor Party movement. Of course LaFollette will fight the radical new National Farmer-Labor Party everywhere, nationally and locally.

The LaFollette movement is a menace to the Farmer-Labor Party movement. The worst feature of the situation is that the leaders of the Farmer-Labor party movement, those of the "progressive" brand, do not realize this fact. They are perfectly willing, apparently, to give up all thought of organizing a party and to jump on the LaFollette band wagon. In the coming months when LaFollette begins to set up his independent and old party candidates in the various states, we may look for many of these progressives who now claim to be such ardent advocates of the Farmer-Labor Party, to cut their organizations to pieces at the behest of LaFollette. Already, by their refusal to participate in the St. Paul convention, they have shown how lightly they hold the organization of the Farmer-Labor Party and how willing they are to cast the whole project overboard when their Moses tells them to do so.

In this situation the new National Farmer-Labor Party, formed at the June 17th convention, occupies a very strategic position. It is the sole serious representative and crystallization of the Farmer-Labor Party idea. The old Fitzpatrick Farmer-Labor Party has blown up and disappeared; the socialistic American Labor Party never did amount to anything; and the conservative Farmer-Labor Party movements in the various states are showing a strong tendency to liquidate themselves in the shapeless and hostile LaFollette movement. One of the greatest tasks of the new party will be to carry forward the labor party idea, in these days when it is so attacked from all sides. This it will accomplish by rallying around itself all those conscious elements among the workers and farmers who realize that the building of a genuine political party of industrial workers and exploited farmers is incomparably more important than trailing along in the train of any politician, especially that of the ambitious petty-bourgeois, LaFollette. Thruout the country unquestionably there are large masses of toilers who understand the necessity for a definite organization, as against the glittering promises of opportunistic politicians. These will assemble in the National Farmer-Labor Party, which is destined to play a significant role in the coming campaign. Every believer in the Farmer-Labor Party idea will rally to the support of the new party, which is the sole defender of that idea against the liquidating tendency of the LaFollette movement.